

Catholicism in the News

February 3, 2009

Volume 4, Number 2

Religious Studies Dept.

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Catholics and Jews Again in the News

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Many, I suspect, have heard about the latest falling out between Jewish groups and the Vatican – concerning the Pope’s revoking of the excommunication of a schismatic Bishop who turns out to be a Holocaust denier. Some may also be aware of other recent sources of conflict and tension: Catholic statements about the violence in Gaza, the Pope’s reinstatement of “traditional” Catholic language praying for the conversion of Jews in the Good Friday liturgy, and fears about the Pope’s planned trip to Israel in May. These and other events have contributed to a sense among some observers that the growing reconciliation between Catholics and Jews since Vatican II (in the early 1960s), and especially during the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005), has been slowing or is even being reversed.

Given the importance of this topic for us at Regis – a Catholic university dedicated to the ideals of Vatican II, and one with Jewish students, staff, and faculty – and the complexity of issues involved, this edition of *Catholicism in the News* will be longer than most. I’ll focus on recent events. Perhaps in a subsequent issue I will try to give a brief sketch of the long and, until recently, largely tragic history of Catholic-Jewish relations.

My essay may also be controversial since I have been a participant in “Catholic-Jewish” relations throughout my life, and in recent years have been a fairly passionate participant. Thus, while I shall strive to be as objective as possible, I will not hesitate to express personal judgments. I realize that at every step in what follows others may see things differently. I encourage them to write in reply and will, unless they do not wish it, publish such replies in the next issue.

1. Frankly I think the Pope goofed in his removal of excommunication for the Holocaust-denier Bishop. Jewish groups are right to be offended and others right to be astounded. I suspect (hope) it will be a short lived “media event” that will not cause significant damage. I hope that readers noted the Pope’s “next day” conciliatory message to Jews, with its strong statement about the reality and total evil of the Holocaust, and its strong affirmation about the continuing importance of reconciliation between Catholics and Jews.

Here’s my personal suspicion about why the Pope went ahead with the removal of excommunication even though he knew or could and should have known about the man’s views on the Holocaust. (I stress that this is mostly my speculation, not reported facts.) Reconciling with this schismatic group has been on the Vatican’s agenda for some time, and this “intra-Catholic” goal was, for the moment, more important for

than its relations with Judaism. Why? Because the status of bishops (and thus of priests) is utterly central to the Pope's understanding of Catholicism, and thus of his own primary responsibilities as Pope. Having bishops who are canonically (or validly) ordained by a schismatic Archbishop represents a serious threat to the official or orthodox understanding of the "divinely ordained structure of the Catholic Church" – and thus to the unity of the Church. So the fact that this Bishop is a Holocaust denier is less important to the Vatican than the fact that he is a validly ordained Bishop who must be brought back within the Catholic structure of authority.

More "liberal" Catholics don't care as much about this authority structure and this understanding of Catholic unity. Indeed, the most fundamental issue dividing so-called "conservative" and so-called "liberal" Catholics today concerns the nature and exercise of church authority. Thus the "liberals" are miffed that the Pope spends so much energy mending fences with conservative extremists while in many other ways he alienates even moderately liberal Catholics. Most non-Catholic observers (such as Jews and secular media folks) simply don't "get" the Vatican's concern for what probably seems a fairly "medieval" and arcane understandings of structure and authority. Thus their surprise and outrage.

2. The tiff about restoring the "traditional" wording of a prayer in the Good Friday liturgy is actually more significant than it seems.

The "traditional" prayer that I grew up with not only prayed for the conversion of Jews, but labeled them "perfidious" – something dropped from Benedict's restoration. The old Latin may actually have meant "unbelieving" (referring to the obvious fact that Jews do not accept Jesus as God and Savior), but the English translation that millions of Catholics heard now seems the equivalent of the Muslim term "infidel." Even so, I honestly don't think that that term was heard by most American Catholics in anti-Semitic ways. Nor did now controversial "passion plays" (dramatically re-enacting the events of Jesus' passion and death and typically depicting "Jews" as responsible), any more than Mel Gibson's notorious film, lead most American Catholics towards anti-Semitic attitudes. Yet I'd also have to say that until recently most Catholics, at least in this country, remained blithely ignorant of their Jewish neighbors' far longer memories of accusations about being "Christ killers" which often reached a pitch around Good Friday and led to real persecution and pogroms.

Benedict's restoration of that prayer is part of what some have termed his more "muscular" return to traditional Catholic claims to truth – about Jesus and the role of Catholicism in salvation "for all" Benedict has long been a fierce opponent of cultural and religious relativism. He *really does* believe in inter-religious dialogue, but sees acknowledgement of conflicting truth claims as central to such dialogue. Thus he is not afraid to offend Jews (and Muslims and others) by echoing John Paul II's call for a more evangelical and missionary Christianity which finds no contradiction between strong support for religious freedom and toleration in the political realm and prayers for conversion in the religions realm.

Many other (more "liberal") Catholics part with the Pope as they are struggle towards a different understanding of religious pluralism and dialogue – one which, while eschewing the easy and culturally prevalent secular path of multi-cultural relativism, nonetheless might allow for far greater acknowledgement of the truth of other faiths and might nourish real mutual cooperation as we move into a shared global future.

3. Events in Gaza and, more generally, the recent history of conflict in Israel-Palestine involve more long-standing and perhaps far more serious differences between many Catholics and many Jews.

The Vatican has long had differences with Israel about Jerusalem and about the status of Palestinians. It officially recognized Israel only relatively recently, in 1993 under John Paul II, though it has had significant relations with the Jewish state since its inception. It still speaks of “the Holy Land,” a designation some Jews see as an implicit snub of Israel’s legitimacy. For years it lobbied for international recognition of Jerusalem as an independent city under shared Christian-Jewish-Muslim authority. It has always been especially concerned about Palestinian Christians, and more generally about human rights for all Palestinians. In recent years it has seemed to share the general European tilt of opinion towards the Palestinians. During the height of the Gaza violence, one highly placed Vatican Cardinal spoke of Gaza as “a huge concentration camp” – a remark which, whether calculated or not, was inevitably taken as inflammatory by Israeli and Jewish sensitivities.

Of course the Vatican has also spoken up for Palestinian rights because of its concern for good relations with Arab and Muslim states that have significant Christian and Catholic populations. Indeed, some observers suggest that recently Rome is increasingly more concerned about relations with Islam (and also Hinduism) than with Judaism for obvious demographic and geo-political reasons. Catholicism is growing far more rapidly in India and Africa than in the West. Thus it is growing in places dominated by or having borders with Islam and Hinduism, and is declining (at least proportionately) in places like Europe where Jewish-Christian relations have long been important. As one commentator recently said: “There are roughly 13 million Jews in the world, and 1.6 billion Muslims; you do the math.” And the same “math” figures in Catholic relations with India and also China. Judaism, in other words, may no longer be the most significant religious “other” for Catholicism. Yet such realities probably only heighten Jewish fears and insecurities.

Until quite recently American Catholics by and large have rejoiced at improving relations with Judaism and with Israel. They share outrage about the Holocaust and did not question the “traditional” American foreign policy tilt towards Israel. Yet (and this is my judgment), many leadership Catholics (both lay and clerical) have increasingly begun to question that foreign-policy tilt. As I put it to a large Jewish audience a year or so ago, the Catholics I talk to are undergoing an almost “180-turn” in their views on Israel-Palestine. That observation did not win me any friends, but I believed then, and still believe, that it is largely true and needs saying – not to sour Catholic-Jewish relations, but to put them on a more honest footing, and perhaps to enable all of us to work both towards peace with the Muslim world and for greater and more real security for Israel.

Let me put this last point another way. As I see it, leadership Catholics in this country increasingly share so-called “controversial” views about Israel-Palestine which are being vigorously articulated by Jimmy Carter. I also suspect that such views are becoming more widespread in “mainstream” American Protestant leadership circles. I suspect they are not (yet?) shared by most “ordinary” Catholics and Protestants. And I know they are vigorously rejected by strongly pro-Israel American Protestant fundamentalists.

It should not be surprising, then, that there are growing tensions, both globally and in this country, between many Catholics and many Jews. Indeed, I’ve only presented one Catholic perspective on such tensions. We, at least on this campus, need to hear other perspectives – whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or secular. I hope that *Catholicism in the News* might serve as one vehicle for such exchange, and I hope that recent events might encourage greater participation in related events at Regis.